

The Saint Chapter 4

Dr. Miranda Astor knew dozens of reasons a human body would cease to function. Some of them were brutal—exsanguination, suffocation, crush injuries, advanced disease. Some of them were quick, done in a blink with no chance for survival. Others still were quiet, their true cause a mystery, especially if no one looked past the surface.

One thing was sure. If Miranda meant to kill someone, they died. This was not, unfortunately, a trait shared by her husband, Royce Gannon, and God damn it, was competence really that difficult?

“It seems we have a problem,” Miranda said, arching a brow at Royce from the antique Queen Anne wingback chair behind her desk. The Throne, Royce jokingly called it, thinking he was charming. And to others, she supposed he was. Royce had the flawless manners and ease that could only be bought with inherited money and a yacht-load of privilege.

Blue eyes that carried his smile when he meant for them too. The classic blond-haired, fit-bodied handsomeness readily found in GQ magazine, although he was gracefully leaning into those laugh lines and tasteful threads of silver beginning to appear in his hair. It was all too easy for a man like Royce to dismiss things like eleven thousand-dollar desk chairs with a laugh and a knowing wink.

But Miranda had earned that chair, just as she’d earned their penthouse apartment at the Metropolitan, their villa in Tuscany, and the Alexander McQueen suit she’d carefully chosen from her closet this morning. She’d done things other people would probably call unspeakable in order to climb the ladder. She’d simply called them necessary; after all, she was here, wasn’t she? Renowned physician. Remington Memorial’s CEO. Self-made multi-millionaire.

Head of the biggest health care fraud scheme on the eastern seaboard. Possibly the entire country.

But Miranda hadn’t pulled herself out of the dirt she’d been born in to stop at anything less, just as she hadn’t married Royce for his charm, and certainly not for love. Christ, the thought was laughable. Like everything else in her life, he had a place and a purpose. Not that he’d fulfilled it last night.

“Oh?” Royce asked. The surprise on his classically handsome face was genuine, telling Miranda that he hadn’t even bothered to check the accuracy of his work, and she pressed her irritation into a tight smile.

“Yes. Unfortunately, that glitch in the system that I asked you to take care of yesterday is still an issue.”

There were plenty of places Miranda could speak more freely about the darker side of their business dealings. The prescription forgeries. The diversion of narcotics. The doctor shopping and billing fraud, all masterminded by her, all at her command. But the hospital wasn't one of those places, no matter how private her corner office, and protecting herself was her number-one priority.

Prison, and the lack of control that went with it, wasn't an option.

Thankfully, Royce got the message to speak with care. "Are you sure, darling? I was pretty thorough."

"Not quite thorough enough." She'd been highly disappointed to see Axel Franklin's name in Remington Memorial's database of admitted patients this morning, rather than on the list of current occupants at the morgue. A review of his chart had confirmed it. The little bastard still had a pulse. "See for yourself."

Sliding a tablet across the pristine blotter on her mahogany executive desk, Miranda waited for Royce to skim the chart himself. Royce was no doctor, but he'd grown up rolling in money, and in this case, that Ivy League education paid off.

"Well. That's unfortunate."

It was an understatement. Greed had made Axel forget his place. He was a cog—functionally necessary, but of very little significance. He was replaceable. One of hundreds of people working one of a dozen different healthcare fraud schemes that Miranda had carefully crafted. Not that Axel knew there were other schemes. Miranda wasn't stupid. He knew only what he needed to in order to serve his purpose, which was supposed to have been going to area hospitals under an assumed name complaining of pain from a fake chronic condition. Thanks to Miranda, the "condition" had very convincing paperwork to back it up.

All Axel had to do was fill his resulting prescription for pain killers and drop the narcotics with a contact Miranda had carefully recruited, and in exchange, Axel got a cut of their street value. But he'd ruined it all by demanding more, then threatening to go to the police when she, through her contact, refused.

No one—no one—took control from Miranda. No one else dictated the terms of the empire she had worked so hard to build. She alone got to play God. She decided who did what. Who got what.

And she decided who died.

"It's a loose end we cannot afford," Miranda corrected. It didn't matter that Axel had no idea who she was, nor had he ever laid eyes on Royce until Royce had stabbed him in an alley around the corner from his sh!thole of an apartment last night. No one could prove she had anything to do with any of the fraud that bankrolled both her lifestyle and

her ego. In fact, Royce was the only person who could definitively connect her to any of the fraud she'd engineered or the people she'd had killed, and she had a safeguard for that, too. Everything else was circumstantial or hearsay. No paperwork. No electronic trail that would be admissible in court. No damning evidence pointing to her and her alone.

"It'll need to be taken care of before it gets problematic. Permanently this time."

After a slight hesitation, Royce said, "That might prove difficult, considering the current circumstances."

"Are you saying you're not up to it?"

The question landed right where Miranda meant it to—in Royce's expansive and highly sensitive ego—and he stiffened in the wingback chair across from her desk. "Of course not. I'm simply saying we'll need to work around a few roadblocks for safety's sake. That's all."

"I'm already ahead of you, sweetheart," she said, smiling just enough to make him think they were in this together. Reaching for the tablet Royce had lowered to her desk, she tapped her way to a new screen before handing it back to him. "What do you think?"

He read for a moment, nodding his approval. "Brilliant. As usual."

Miranda inclined her head in acknowledgment. "You'll need to act quickly." The last thing they needed right now was for Axel to regain consciousness and start talking.

Royce's jaw tightened just enough to hint at the cruelty hidden beneath his charming exterior. "Consider it done."

She resisted the urge to point out that she'd considered it done the first time, opting instead to fake a what-would-I-do-without-you smile. "Thank you, darling."

Now all she had to do was find someone to replace Axel, and everything would be just fine.

Carmen was ready for lunch. Or wait, maybe it was still breakfast time? No, she'd taken far too many vital signs and patient histories not to be at least a few hours into her shift. Hadn't she?

Carmen forced her Danskos to a stop on the linoleum, closed her eyes, and dragged in a deep breath. Between working at the Davenport Clinic and the work she'd been doing far from the Davenport Clinic, the days and nights were beginning to blur together, turning into an indistinct haze. The three hours of sleep she'd squeezed in between coming home just shy of dawn and when she'd hauled herself out of bed a few hours ago had been of the toss-and-turn variety, which didn't exactly help her brain fog. But it

hadn't been her fault that Liam had literally shown up on her doorstep, asking questions she'd had to answer with caution. Or that his eyes were so piercing that they might as well shoot truth serum darts.

Or that, even after all this time, she still wanted to fling her idiot self into his stupid, well-muscled arms despite the fact that she knew all too well how much she didn't belong there.

She'd found out the hard way, and gotten the pride-punching rejection to go with it.

Carmen shook her head, forcing herself out of her head and back to the clinic. She had a thousand better things to spend her energy on than the memory of how Liam Hollister's arms had felt around her in the only moment of weakness she'd had in over half a decade. Namely, the fact that the digital intake board hanging over the nurse's station showed seventeen people needing to be triaged and treated for various ailments. Running a hand over the two French braids (mostly) keeping her hair in check, she reached for an electronic chart, turning toward the waiting room...

She froze to a halt three steps later.

Liam—that's Detective Hollister to you, libido—stood just past the double doors leading in from the lobby, with Isabella and Carmen's boss, Harlow Davenport-Bradshaw, on either side of him. He looked just as gorgeous as he had last night, with his dark red stubble perfectly trimmed and his T-shirt and jeans loving every last angle of his strong, lean frame. Looking up, he saw her just a beat before anyone else, his spine straightening as their eyes locked and held.

Now she had no escape and no pride. Fvcking fantastic.

"Ah, Carmen, you have perfect timing," Harlow said. Her smile was genuine, and okay, maybe this wasn't going to be horrible. "Detectives Walker and Hollister want to ask you a couple questions about a case they're working on. Is that okay?"

Annnnd maybe it would be pure, fiery hell. "Oh. But we're really busy," Carmen tried, lifting her chin at the intake board. "I'd hate for anyone who isn't feeling well to have to wait."

"I can pull Connor from the back to cover you," Harlow offered. "I'm sure he won't mind."

"Don't worry. We've only got a few questions," Liam added, just as cool as the other side of the pillow, and God, how was Carmen's heart beating even faster now?

Nope. No. She had to handle this, just as she had last night. "Suit yourself, I guess."

"Would you like me to come with you, Carmen?"

She battled her shock, trying like hell to keep it from her face. Harlow was offering to come with her?

Isabella looked just as surprised as Carmen felt. "Oh, that's really not necessary," she said. "Carmen's not in any trouble."

"That never even crossed my mind." Harlow looked at Carmen with a kindness she didn't deserve. "What I meant was, I'm happy to go with you if you don't want to do this alone."

Carmen shook her head before things got any further out of hand. "No. Thanks," she added, too late to soften the response. "Like they said, it's just a few questions. No big deal."

Both Harlow and Connor knew that Carmen helped Isabella from time to time on cases. Her criminal record was part of her employment history, full disclosure and all that crap. The background check would've kicked it all up, anyway. It'd been better to just throw out all that ugly in one go.

Two arrests for drug charges in the same six months tended to stick to a girl, even if she had testified against her dealer when he'd beaten a woman to death.

"If you change your mind, I'll be right here," Harlow said, bringing Carmen back to the clinic. "The conference room next to my office is nice and private. You're welcome to use it. Take as long as you need."

"Thanks," Isabella said. Although Carmen knew better than to think it would affect how any of them did their jobs, she also knew that Liam and Isabella and Harlow were friends. The smiles and pleasantries that passed between them as they parted were genuine. Hell if that didn't make lying to all of them about the night clinic that much sh!ttier, but Carmen didn't exactly have a choice. Anyway, she wasn't like Isabella or Harlow, and she'd be fooling herself to think otherwise, no matter how kind either of them might be.

Steeling her shoulders, she followed Isabella and Liam down the hallway, past the exam rooms and curtain areas. The conference room was small but well-furnished, with a rectangular six-person table in the center, surrounded by comfortable office chairs, a series of framed black-and-white photographs of Remington, a large potted weeping fig tree (Harlow's contribution), and a slender side table bearing a pod coffeemaker and a basket full of prepackaged snacks (one hundred percent Connor's doing). Isabella closed the door behind her after ushering Carmen in, and Carmen pulled her armor into place, spikes and all.

"If this is about that guy from last night, you're wasting your time," she said.

"The guy from last night has a name." Isabella tilted her head. Waited a beat. Then said, "But you already know that, don't you, since you checked in on him this morning."

Carmen covered her surprise with a heavy sigh. So she'd gone to check on the guy. Big deal. Just because she didn't know him—or know how he knew her—didn't mean she had no soul. For fvck's sake, the guy had tried to call her for help. "Why are you here if you already know what I know?"

"Because you're not telling me everything, mija, and I need to find out who stabbed Axel Franklin."

"I am telling you everything." Frustration sizzled through Carmen's veins. "Oh Dios mío, Isabella, I've said it a dozen freaking times! I have no idea who he is."

"Okay," Liam said, holding up his phone. "But you do know this guy, don't you."

Carmen snapped a glance at his phone, fully prepared to tell him that no, she didn't know whoever it was, either, thank you very much...

Except that was a lie.

Carmen stared at the picture of the young Black man she'd triaged and helped treat a couple weeks ago at the night clinic where she worked in North Point. Okay, worked might be a stretch, since she didn't get paid. The doctors who ran the place she referred to in her head as the night clinic didn't have the funds for that, and anyway, the whole place was off the books. The staff was all trained and certified, of course, and they never did major procedures, like surgery. If a person's injury was severe, they always, always advised hospital care. But they did provide access to preventive and prenatal care, along with most services any local urgent care would provide.

The difference was, unless it was clear that a law had been broken, they didn't ask a lot of questions. Most of their patients either didn't have enough money or had no insurance to cover their expenses, and some were scared to go to hospitals or even wellness clinics for the most basic things, like vitamins or vaccines. But that didn't mean they didn't need or deserve healthcare. Dante, who had been hurt on a construction job but hired under the table for the work, had been no different.

Not that Carmen could actually say any of this without getting super-duper fired from her day job, and also possibly arrested. "Who's that guy?" she asked, fishing for how much they knew and how Dante might be involved with Axel.

A muscle in Liam's jaw twitched. "Come on, Carmen."

"His name is Dante West," Isabella said after a beat during which Carmen glared at Liam and the suddenly broody detective glared right back. "He and Axel exchanged a few calls last night. Just before and after Axel called you."

Well, that explained how Axel had gotten her number. Damn it! “Sounds like you should be talking to him, not me,” Carmen said.

“We tried that,” Liam bit out. “But it seems he no longer lives at the address on his driver’s license. He moved out last month, and—funny thing—no one in the building has any idea where he might have gone.”

Carmen shrugged, although her shoulders had to work for it. “I don’t know where he is, either.”

This much was true. She might have called him to check up on his broken wrist after he’d been in for treatment, but she didn’t know where he lived. It was rule number one never to ask patients at the night clinic anything personal outside of a health history.

“Look, Carmen.” Isabella had her soothing voice dialed up to its highest setting, and oh, wasn’t this a switch. “No one wants to get you or Dante jammed up. But we know he called you a couple weeks ago, and that you called him back a day after that, which means you must know him somehow. Right now, you’re the only connection we have to him, and we really need to find him so we can figure out who hurt Axel. Can you help us out with that? Please?”

Carmen opened her mouth to issue a hot and fast “no”, but nothing came out. Whatever Axel and Dante were tangled up in was clearly dangerous. But telling Isabella about the night clinic was a risk she couldn’t take. People needed the care they provided there. Yeah, she’d lose her career if anyone found out, but so would all of the other doctors and nurses who volunteered there, all of whom were just trying to help people in need. It wouldn’t matter if Carmen insisted that the doctors took a hard stand against anything illegal. Gunshot wounds, gang activity, drug seekers, all of it got reported, albeit anonymously. Their purpose was to help, not to enable, and she truly didn’t know anything about whatever had gotten Axel and Dante into trouble. So she took a deep breath, and when she exhaled, she told all the truth she could.

“I don’t know Axel, and I don’t know what he and Dante are tangled up in. I haven’t spoken to Dante in weeks, and I have no idea where he’s crashing or where he hangs out. I’m sorry.”

“But you do know him,” Isabella said, not unkindly.

Which made it that much harder for Carmen to say, “I can’t help you.”

“You mean won’t.”

Liam’s voice sliced through the room. Isabella’s brows slung upward at the same time Carmen took a step back on the linoleum, her guard locked firmly into place.

“Excuse me?”

His stare flashed over hers, a steely mix of gray and green in the overbright fluorescent lighting of the conference room. "You obviously know Dante somehow. He knew Axel was in trouble last night, and told him to call you for help. Axel's in a coma, Dante is in the wind, and all we have is you. So, are you going to tell us exactly how you know Dante, or not?"

"No," Carmen said, pushing the word past the rattle of her pulse at her throat. "I don't know anything that can help you."

"Why don't you tell us what you know and let us be the judge of that?"

Isabella divided a glance between them, lifting one hand. "Why don't we just—"

"No."

Carmen crossed her arms over her chest to punctuate the refusal. Liam opened his mouth—probably to argue, if the storm clouds on his face were anything to go by—but Isabella sideswiped him with a neat shake of her head.

"Okay. If you think of anything we need to know, you can call me any time. No questions asked."

Carmen resisted the urge to snort. "No questions asked" only went so far. Especially for someone like her, with a criminal record and a dark, dirty past. "Whatever. I have patients to triage. Can I go?"

"Of course," Isabella said.

But it was Liam's silence that stuck to her as she walked out the door.